



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### **2019 Was Marked By Defiance and Dissent. 2020 Will Probably Be No Different**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Like 2019, the new year—and perhaps the new decade—is likely to continue to be marked by popular protest, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. Protests are likely to produce uncertain and fragile outcomes at best, irrespective of whether the protesters or vested interests gain the immediate upper hand.

Last year, protests toppled the leaders of Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Only in Sudan did the protests lead to a genuine transition process, and it remains to be seen what the others may yet produce.

What is clear is that protesters have learned not to surrender the street when a leader agrees to resign but to keep up the pressure until a process of transition has been agreed upon that will lead to a more transparent, accountable, and open political system.

Protesters in Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, demanding appointment of a leader untainted by association with the old regime, have stood their ground as governments and vested interests have sought to salvage what they can by attempting to replace one leader by another with close ties to the ruling elites.

Repression buys embattled regimes time at best. More often than not it reinforces the protesters' resolve.

Harsh repression enabled the government of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Sisi, one of the Middle East and North Africa's most brutal leaders, to [quash last year's protests](#). The question is for how long.

That question is all the more pressing given that protesters in the Middle East and North Africa, as in Hong Kong, are driven by a sense of now or never—a sense of having nothing more to lose.

The [killing of more than 100 protesters in Sudan](#) did not stop people from protesting until a transition process was put in place. The [deaths of hundreds of protesters in Iraq](#) and the injuring of thousands more failed to weaken their resolve.

Their resilience suggests a fundamental shift in attitude that goes beyond the sense of desperation associated with having nothing left to lose.

It reflects the evolution of a new assertiveness, sense of empowerment, and rejection of submissive adherence to authority that first emerged in [the 2011 popular Arab uprisings](#) that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen.

Vested interests backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE rolled back the achievements of those revolts, with the exception of Tunisia, leading to the rise of Sisi and brutal civil wars in Libya and Yemen.

In some ways, the counterrevolution has backfired. The war in Yemen has severely [tarnished Saudi Arabia's image](#), focused attention on [the dark side of UAE rulers](#), and fueled the resolve of the 2019 protesters.

The last decade's change in attitudes is also evident in Lebanon and Iraq, where protesters are demanding political and social structures that emphasize national rather than ethnic or sectarian religious identities in a world in which civilizational leaders advocate some form of racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy.

Last weekend's [US military strikes](#) against Iraqi militias associated with Iran suggest that world leaders ignore the protests at their peril.

If protesters focused their demand for a withdrawal of foreign forces primarily on Iranian influence prior to the strikes, they now focus equally on the presence of US forces.

The strikes also put at risk a stalling effort by Saudi Arabia to dial down tensions with Iran in the wake of attacks in September on two key Saudi oil facilities and US reluctance to respond.

Reduced Saudi-Iranian tensions, coupled with changing youth attitudes toward religion, facilitate a moving away from debilitating sectarian politics that have long served to keep autocratic leaders and ruling elites in power.

Even so, fragile protest outcomes are likely to shape the Middle East and North Africa in the coming decade.

Successful uprisings like that of Sudan as well as stalemated ones like those in Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq all run the continuous risk of being thwarted by

power grabs by militaries and other vested interests that can produce harsh repression and even civil war.

“While protesters have the power to force a change of prime minister and can remain in the streets, they do not seem to have the means to realize their broader goals. The country’s politicians and parties have grown rich off the current system and will do everything to defend it, but [they do not have an answer for the protests](#),” said political analyst Stephen A. Cook.

The lesson of the last decade for the coming one is that waves of protest are not a matter of days, months, or even a year. They are long, drawn-out processes that often play out over decades.

2011 ushered in a global era of defiance and dissent with the Arab uprisings as its most dramatic centerpiece.

The decade of the 2020s is likely to be one in which protests produce uncertain and fragile outcomes at best, irrespective of whether protesters or vested interests gain the immediate upper hand.

Fragility at best, instability at worst, is likely to be the norm. To change that, protesters and governments would have to agree on economic, political, and social systems that are truly inclusive and ensure that all have a stake. That is a tall order.

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